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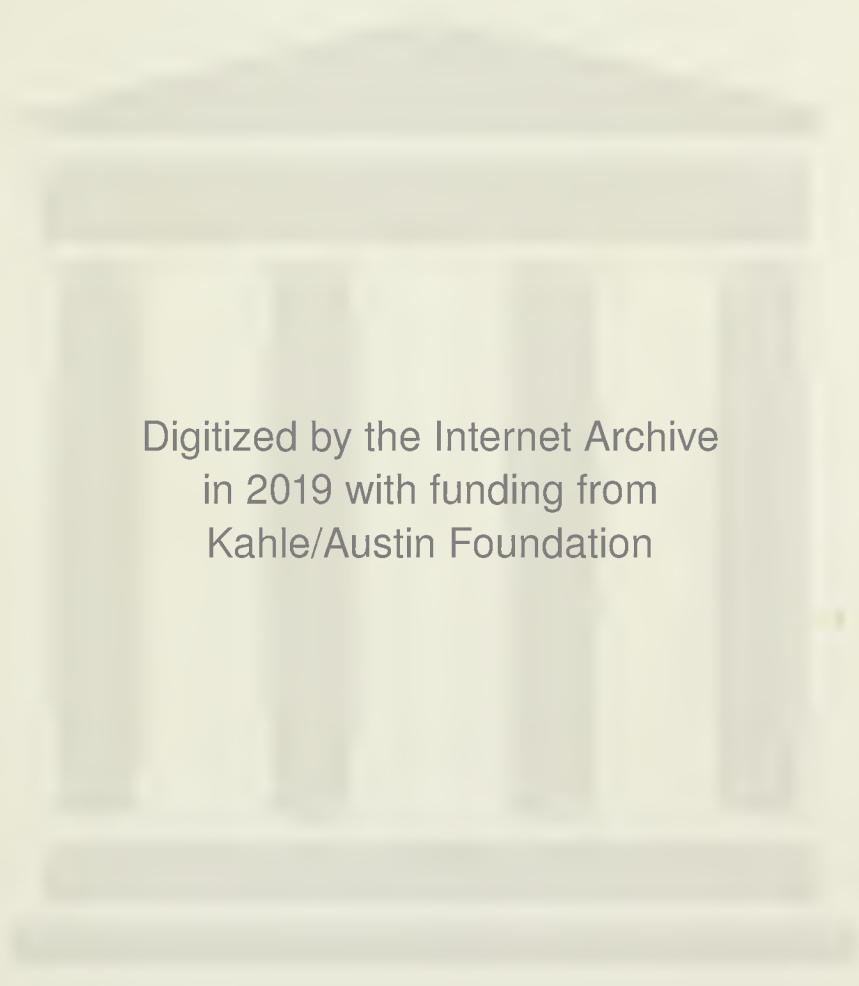
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Blue Moon Booklets No. 1

JOSEPH CONRAD

An

appreciation

by

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JOSEPH CONRAD.

READING Conrad is exactly like reading a fairy tale for grown-up people. Somehow, using ordinary incidents and ordinary people as his materials, he weaves a cloak of romance out of space, and the reader, identifying himself with the people—for they are like himself—and with the incidents—for they are what he would like to experience—is transported to a magic place. There among ships and golden, silent sunlight or magnificent storms, that have the glory of God in their deadly power, an amazing drama is unfolded with the grace of a proud swan unfolding her white wings in battle or in love's pursuit.

The critic bows his head before the pages and listens with the rapt and gentle heart of a school-boy, who blushes as he reads, intoxicated with a

flow of blood and dreaming of what he may do in manhood, when he feels a moving deck beneath his naked feet and hears the wind singing in taut sails. As in a vivid dream, great horizons are opened to the mind and the imagination, fanned by the words, rushes onward, painting domed cities of its own accord, until all the world becomes a glittering phantasy and even death is but a dreaming time.

It becomes futile and ungrateful to seek the meaning or the method of the intellect that affords such pleasure. How has it been done? What canons of art have been obeyed? What has been omitted? The saying of Turgenev that books are written to amuse becomes the only just scales of judgment. And Conrad's own high code of honour, which was so sensitive to the strictest interpretation of good behaviour, forces us to raise our hats in salutation, and then make a low bow.

Yet some sort of brutal denial is necessary, or the human intellect reverts to the state of mind of the servant maid, who feeds her romantic

desires on the wildest and most uncouth drivell in order to stupefy her instincts for revolt against the unhappiness of her daily life. The mind of the servant is cowardly, and is fit only to be the mind of a serving slave. But what is beautiful in man is that he is unhappy as a man and wishes to be a god, to be free from death and the restraint of the earth's balance ; that he wants to fly into space and loot the universe ; that he is always hankering after the tree of knowledge ; that he creates gods only in order to break them ; that he is a being constantly in revolt and in his highest form, finding beauty only in wild tragedy.

This is the ice-bath of the Northern Pole to counteract and judge the strength of Conrad's tropical dream, where men and women wander languidly in gauzy garments that are steeped in sweat. Yet both exist side by side in the human intellect ; as it were, the battle with its fury and its bloody swords, together with the harp-playing, the drinking from golden cups, and the kisses of fair women in the tents. And it is in these two forms that all poetry has been com-

posed, lyric beauty and epic power. Which is the greater? To me the battle and the blood, the terrible Genghiz, with his camel herds, his hosts of horsemen and his jewelled concubines, the storming of Troy, the war for the great bull of Cuailgne, all the terrible madnesses of men and women crashing their bodies and their minds against the boundary walls of human knowledge. But there is sweet singing on the lower plane and it is pleasant to think of Rome and England building up great structures slowly, using polite men as props.

Great empires fix the boundaries of their gods, and restrain their thoughts, and make them the symbols of their fixed laws. Their gods are finite and unchangeable. Their priests are minions of great corporations that sit in judgment with civil judges and bless the brows of criminals whose necks are in the noose. And imperial men are also tame and finite, cogs in a machine, small in themselves, great only insofar as they are part of a wide-reaching whole, which seeks to encircle the earth and make all things similar. And those who write of empires and of imperial

men are perforce finite and obedient to the dictates of a finite God, whom they dare not tamper with but must sing His praises and bewail the misfortunes of those who fail to appreciate the blessings of being inmates of His prosperous and well ordered household.

Among such men stands Conrad in my mind. It appears to me that he accepted the God of the British Empire as something that must not be surpassed, and all his characters are standing on tiptoe striving to be like that God, who is a good honest trader, a man brave in adversity, a home-lover, a man who keeps his word to his friend and robs those who are not of his kin. I understand that Conrad was not aware of this, and perhaps it is all to the benefit of humanity that he was not aware of it ; because it is impossible to be lyrical about a woman when one is aware that there is an unseemly blemish on her body. Even Shelley, the greatest of revolting lyricists, believed in his heart in the romantic God, and his revolt was the outraged horror of the sinner, not of the fearless, cold-eyed adventurer who curls his lips at all that has been and peers over

the brink of chaos in search of truth.

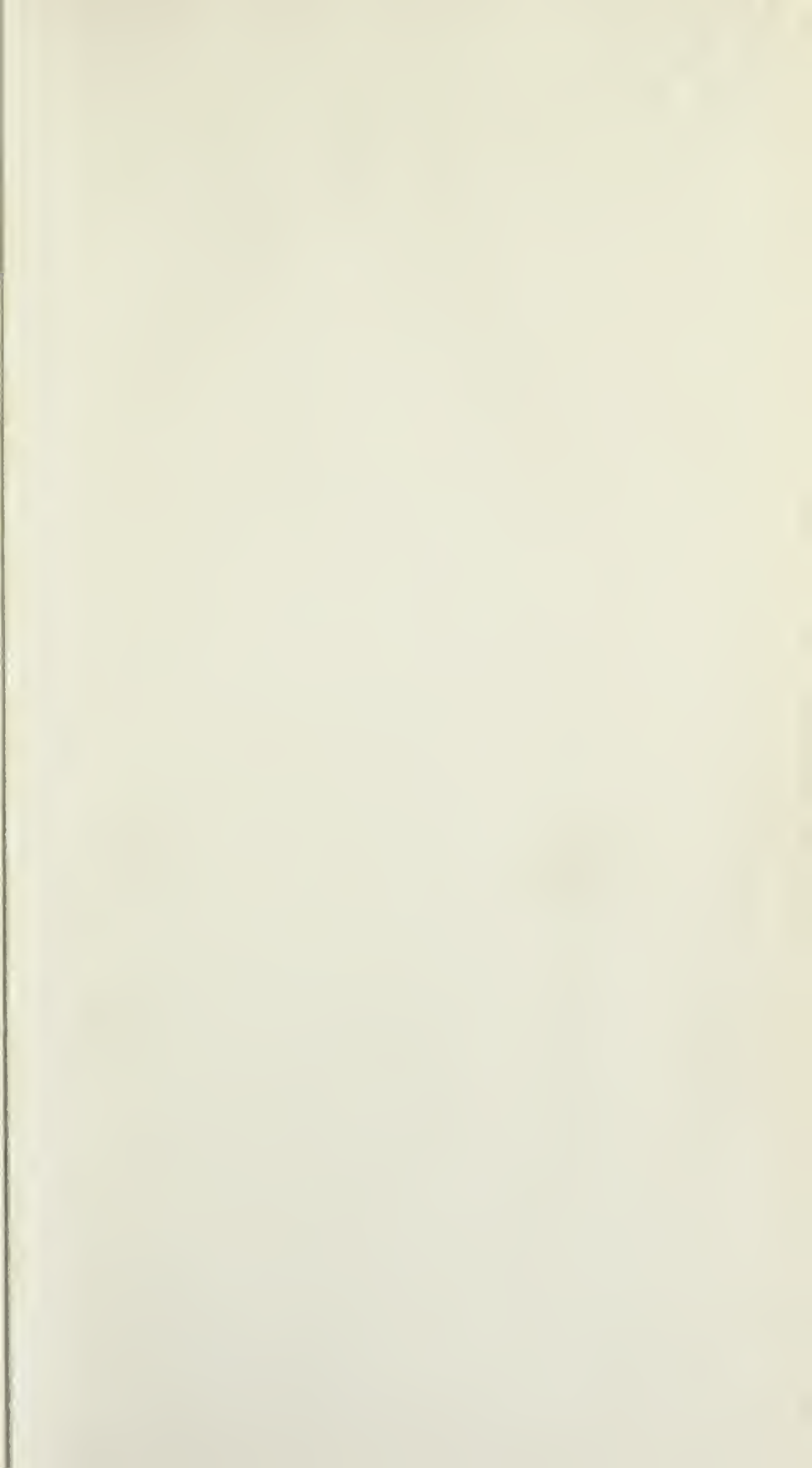
Then while we drink at the sweet fountain of Conrad's work, it is well to remind ourselves sternly that drinking at a fountain is dangerous on a heavy march and that the steep road of death with all its horrors lies before us and that every drop of perspiration is a wound that robs us of our strength. But how sweet is sin and submission ! How pleasant it is to believe that Christ was indeed God and that all that is now ordained, as to honour and justice, was always so and is and is to be ! How pleasant to banish the ruminating, doubting, mind of man and wander with Conrad through the tropics with the mind of a romantic boy, smelling the old decks of wooden ships, seeing sirens in lone bays, meeting sad men who were driven from the brightness of England by their unbridled passions, hearing of good men who remained true to their ideals in adversity, feeling brave when vice is rebuked and virtue is its own reward.

I say that the God of romance is a beautiful God and Conrad is his great prophet and mine

is not the voice to discountenance either of them, even though I was born on a storm-swept rock and hate the soft growth of sunbaked lands where there is no frost in men's bones. Swift thoughts, and the swift flight of ravenous birds, and the squeal of terror of hunted animals are to me reality. I have seen the leaping salmon fly before the salmon whale, and I have seen the sated buck horn his mate, and the wanderer leave his wife in search of fresh bosoms with the fire of joy in his eye. For me, that man is great who is his own God and the slave man is a harnessed lout who jingles the coppers of his hire in the scales of mediocrity.

Great God of Passion, whose hoary face is inscribed with the lines of greatest poetry that man has written and in whose fruitful loins still rest Iliads of verse and prose, to be written on the still unconquered stars, in commemoration of the rout of Jahveh and his angels, by man the unappeasable conqueror, let you act as judge. On that great voyage perhaps, Conrad will be the songster to amuse the tired warriors when a halt is called.

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